



[New Issue Archives](#)

• [Log In To RS Archives](#)

• Username

LOG IN

[Not a member? Click here.](#)

[Rolling Stone](#)



[Skip to the content.](#)

- [Music](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Artist](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Videos](#)
- [Subscribe Now](#)

 Like 870k

- [facebook](#)
- [twitter](#)
- [RSS](#)

• More:

• [Matt Taibbi](#)

•

• [Peter Travers](#)

•

• [Venues That Rock](#)

•

• [Defining Moments](#)

•

• [Y! Music](#)

• [Matt Taibbi](#)

• [Peter Travers](#)

• [David Fricke](#)

• [Rob Sheffield](#)

• [RS Politics Daily](#)

• [Tech Blog](#)

• [Fashion Blog](#)

• [more Blogs »](#)

• [Albums](#)

• [Songs](#)

• [Movies](#)

DISCOVER



EXHIBIT 58  
TO DECLARATION OF  
WILLIAM LIVINGSTON

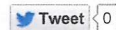
## Casualties of War

Michael J. Fox, Sean Penn, Don Harvey

Directed by Brian De Palma

Rolling Stone:star rating

Community:star rating



[Comment](#)

0

By [Peter Travers](#)

August 18, 1989

In the thick of the vietnam conflict back in 1968, only one movie honcho had the brass to put his views, however crackers, right up there on the screen. I'm talking about the dove-baiting Duke himself, John Wayne. As the star and director of **The Green Berets**, the right-wing Wayne attempted to give this undeclared war what the government could not: the good-guy-bad-guy clarity of a western. Liberal Hollywood justifiably derided the Duke but gutlessly offered no film alternative. Vietnam was moral quicksand. Translation: box-office disaster. At the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive, the Oscar-winning Best Picture was the musical *Oliver!*

A year later, Daniel Lang wrote a nonfiction piece for the *New Yorker* about a squad of American soldiers court-martialed for the abduction, rape and murder of a young Vietnamese woman. The piece, published soon after in book form under the title *Casualties of War*, was both grim truth and a devastating metaphor for American imperialism. Hollywood stayed clear. It would be a decade before Michael. *Comin's Deer Hunter* and Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* could open fire on the war and still be covered in box-office and oscar glory.

Since, then, dozens of films have tried to distill the conflicted experience that was Vietnam into a coherent vision. Some came close, notably Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* and Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. Some smaller-scaled, lesser-hyped efforts came even closer, especially Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans* and Patrick Duncan's 84 *Charlie Mopic*. Others, typified by Sly Stallone's *Rambo*, inanely attempted to turn defeat into macho victory. No doubt the Duke would have approved. No matter. Even with more than two decades of hindsight, Vietnam continues to provoke, polarize and evade categorization.

The flawed but overwhelming movie that the director Brian De Palma and the screenwriter David Rabe have made of Lang's story is also riven with ambivalence. Playwright Rabe is a Vietnam vet, best known for a stage trilogy (*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Streamers* and *Sticks and Bones*) that told of the war's horrors firsthand. De Palma is an admitted draft dodger. A master of suspense, perverse wit and hyperbolized camera movement, the director of *Carrie*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface* and *The Untouchables* would seem artistically unsuited to capturing the documentary details of this tragedy.

Going in, the fear is that De Palma might jack up the truth for jolts. But De Palma reduces his pyrotechnics to a few sequences (a soldier trapped in a Viet Cong tunnel, a grenade under a latrine); this is his most mature, ambitious and emotionally charged work. Oddly, it is Rabe who is guilty of grandstanding. His impassioned, theatrical dialogue sometimes rings hollow. As PFC Eriksson, the cherry with only three weeks in combat who refuses to join in the crime, Michael J. Fox is forced to wrap his tongue around some devilishly unwieldy Rabe diatribes. It's tough being a movie's moral conscience. Fox weathers the ordeal admirably. In this movie powerhouse, he gives his finest screen performance.

The point is that Rabe doesn't need these big speeches to convince us that Eriksson is right to refuse to take part in an atrocity and right to bring charges against those who do. What makes the film distinctive, devastating and unforgettable is the way De Palma lets the actions of the characters speak volumes. There is no conflict between what De Palma and Rabe are trying to say. But their methods are different. De Palma shows; Rabe tells.

Onscreen, the De Palma way works best. When Meserve, the young sergeant played by Sean Penn, rescues Eriksson during a nighttime firefight, De Palma cannily establishes their relationship through expression and gesture. Meserve's eye is always on his squad. When his radio man (Erik King) is killed by a sniper just weeks before his tour is up, something snaps. Meserve's rage begins building in waves that will find release in violence. Penn's acting, though still plagued by De Niro-isms, has a stinging force. His Meserve is a hard-nosed kid, a solid soldier tired of watching his charges getting slaughtered. He orders his squad to kidnap a Vietnamese girl (newcomer Thuy Thu Le, in a wrenching performance). She will be their entertainment on a

long-range reconnaissance mission. In a war with no moral ground rules, Meserve has lost his bearings. Initiating the gang rape is a form of revenge and a way to draw his squad into a chilling complicity.

The rape scene, though Steve Burum's camera keeps its distance, is the stuff of nightmares. But it is here that De Palma builds skillfully on a theme he's been obsessed with for years: the way male sexual fantasies link up with violence. "The army calls this a weapon," sneers Meserve, pointing to his rifle. Then, grabbing his crotch, he barks: "This is a weapon." Each man, excepting Eriksson, takes his turn with the girl. Hatcher (John C. Reilly) mindlessly follows. Clark, scarily played by Don Harvey, needs to put a knife to her throat to achieve an erection. Even Diaz (John Leguizamo), who abhors the rape, goes at it to avoid being ridiculed by his pals. The sexual assault is merely a prelude to Meserve's order of execution. "Waste her," he cries. His orders are obeyed.

In these scenes, De Palma's merciless vision is unblinking. More than any other Vietnam film to date, *Casualties of War* shows how quickly the sexual instinct can become a killing instinct, how quickly both instincts can become a test of maleness and how quickly the unthinkable can become the inevitable. A prologue and epilogue show Eriksson years after his discharge. The soldiers he had helped convict are now free, their sentences reduced. But Eriksson is still tormented. No big pictorial De Palma effects for the climax. Only the devastation written on Eriksson's face to mark wounds that may never heal. Even when Rabe's rhetoric threatens to defuse the story's explosive charge, De Palma steers a steady course through a war that continues to divide a nation. This is a portrait of hell so harrowing it's impossible to shake.

 Like 0

 Tweet 0

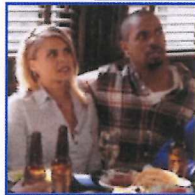
[prev](#) [Sex, Lies, and Videotape](#) [Movie Review Main](#) [Next](#)  
Wired



[MUSIC](#) 100 Greatest Debut Albums



[MOVIES](#) 'Iron Man 3' Is Nothing New



[TV](#) Why You Should Watch 'Happy Endings'



[POLITICS](#) No Price Big Banks Can't Fix

#### Picks From Around the Web

